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AUTHOR Schumacher, Sally
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ABSTRACT

Ethnography is a research methodology that belongs to a genre of research called by various names, including educational anthropology, participant observation, case study, field study, and naturalistic inquiry. Ethnography was used as the research methodology for a nine-month study of adult beginning readers in Virginia. The research design was a case study that focused on the learning-to-read process of adults in beginning reading instructional situations. Data included the field notes of the observers, documents and materials used in the settings, and statistics descriptive of test results. Analysis was qualitative rather than quantitative. The ethnographic procedures used in the studies included (1) selecting and training a research team, (2) gaining access and acceptance in the field, (3) holding weekly staff meetings and seminars to specify multiple research roles and evolving focuses; and (4) using procedures to establish a valid database. The study concluded that ethnography is an appropriate methodology when the purpose of the research is to describe and analyze a process from which variables can be identified and relationships suggested. These relationships can later be tested as hypotheses in verification research. Although the methodology is rigorous, time consuming, intellectually demanding, and presents complexities in roles and research ethics, it does provide standards to assess the validity of the data and it is an exciting and fascinating approach to inquiry. (KC)

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ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODOLOGY IN A STUDY OF WORD RECOGNITION STRATEGIES OF ADULT BEGINNING READERS

Sally Schumacher, Ph.D.
Virginia Commonwealth University

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ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODOLOGY IN A STUDY OF WORD RECOGNITION STRATEGIES OF ADULT BEGINNING READERS

Sally Schumacher, Ph.D.
Virginia Commonwealth University

Ethnography is a research methodology which belongs to a genre of research called by various names, including educational anthropology, ethnography, participant-observation, case study, field study, and naturalistic inquiry. Participant-observation is the traditional methodology of anthropologists and has been used by the winners of the most prestigious sociological research awards given by the American Sociological Association (Becker, 1970). In educational research, the increased publication of ethnographic studies and methodological writings indicates recognition of the research contributions made through this mode of inquiry (Schumacher, 1979, and Wilson, 1977). As L. M. Smith (1978) notes,

> outside the dominant educational psychological paradigm in educational research, a larger body of research exists within the qualitative, ethnographic, participant-observation genre... A brief overview ... suggests its applicability to broad array of problems within education--schools, classroom, curriculum development, and evaluation. (p. 329.)

This paper presents the foreshadowed problems of a nine-month study of adult beginning readers, the rationale for ethnography as the research methodology, and the procedures used by a participant-observation team (Boraks and Schumacher, 1981). Throughout the paper, advantages and difficulties of this methodology for the Study of Adult Beginning Readers Project funded by the Virginia Department of Education are cited.

FORESHADOWED PROBLEMS

Malinowski (1922, pp. 8-9) stated a half a century ago that "preconceived ideas are pernicious in any scientific work, but foreshadowed problems are the main endowment of a scientific thinker, and these problems are first revealed to the observer by his theoretical studies." Malinowski calls attention to the need for an awareness of the theories, research, issues, and debates in that area of social science in which the setting and the problem lie. Foreshadowed problems are those questions which represent an initial and partial analysis of the problem, a general idea of the concepts in relevant research areas, and tentative modes of thinking. These questions are partly dependent upon the intellectual heritage which the ethnographer brings to the field, and which enables the investigator to recognize a problem.

The statement of foreshadowed problems or research questions also reflects the possible theoretical stance which may be taken in the actual study. Whether one enters the field with a sociological, a psychological, an organizational, or a political perspective, it seems important that this stance be made explicit. In essence, the ethnographer who enters the field with several conceptual frameworks or competing theories regarding the event--such as learning, curriculum development, teaching, and creativity--is able to recognize more easily what does occur and explore more fully the conceptual realities of the settings. As events unfold in the natural setting, the various conceptual frameworks and theories are cast aside or combined or reworked until concepts or variables which most closely fit reality have been generated. The

open-ended quality of the research process is necessary for discovery rather than verification research.

The foreshadowed problems in this study were: 1) to determine current reading strategies used by adult beginning readers (ABR's); 2) to determine the evolving pattern of specific reading strategies of ABR's; and 3) to relate productive and nonproductive reading strategies of ABR's to reading achievement, instructional strategies, and student characteristics. This focus is schematically presented in Figure 1.

The initial conceptual frameworks relevant to this study were drawn from 1) reading theories (i.e., psycholinguistics, information processing, perceptual theories); 2) sociology (i.e., group processes, roles, norms); 3) anthropology (i.e., multicultural language, dialects, and customs); and 4) adult learning theories. Some of these conceptual frameworks, such as those from anthropology, provided insufficient explanatory power. Other conceptual frameworks (e.g., adult development) were added as the data began to accumulate.

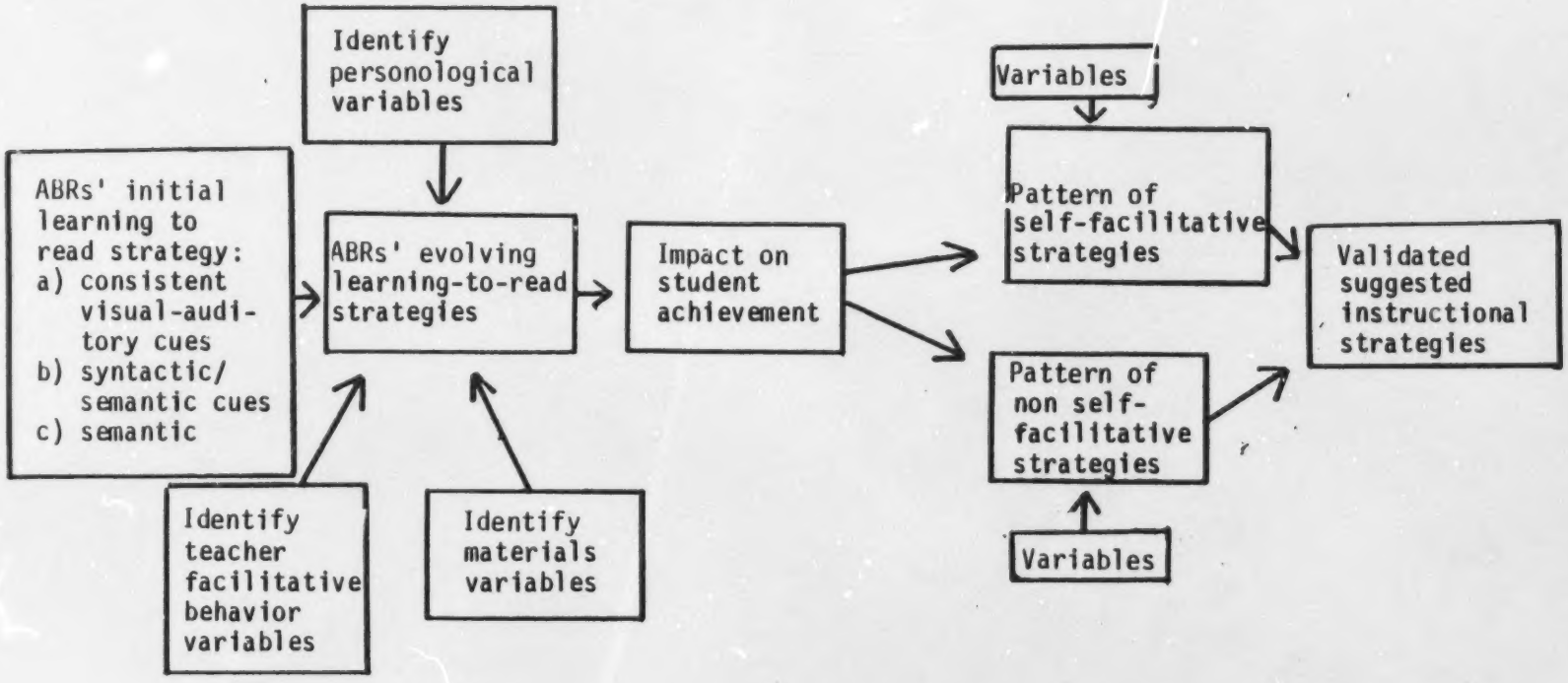
DEFINITION AND METHODOLOGICAL RATIONALE

Definition

Ethnography in this study had three characteristics (Schumacher, 1981). The research design was a case study which focused on the learning-to-read process of adults in beginning reading instructional situations. Although there were numerous contrasting instructional situations, the design was noncomparative. Case study design differs from experimental design, which compares statistically equivalent groups

Figure 1

Focus of Reading Process Observation



T = Time

_____ previous research indicates that these are the variables in the learning-to-read process

of selected subjects. Case study design is based on a philosophy of science called phenomenology (Stake, 1978; Bruyn, 1966).

Second, data were analyzed through recognized qualitative procedures (Denzin, 1978; Guba, 1978). Data included the field notes of the observers, documents and materials used in the settings, and statistics descriptive of tests results. The analysis of the multiple sources of data and the multiple kinds of data was qualitative (rather than quantitative, as in the use of tests of statistical significance).

Third, ethnography is field research which focuses on the participants in their natural setting. The data consisted of extensive field notes, based on noninterfering systematic observations, which described the events as they occurred. Participant-observation allowed the researchers to observe more directly the complexity of reality without the reactive effects (Webb et al., 1981) and threats to internal validity often associated with experimental control and manipulation of treatments.

Rationale

Ultimately, the use of ethnographic procedures developed from the purpose and context of the study. Boraks (1979) noted that adult education programs are diverse in adult characteristics, are diverse in program characteristics, serve a fluid population, and involve a complex learning situation with a multiplicity of variables. The context for this study contained elements difficult to match with the requirements for experimental design; if such an experiment were conducted, the results would be of limited internal and external validity.

The purpose of this study was exploratory rather than verification research. Knowledge of adult learning-to-read processes is at an embryonic stage. Learning theories for adults are now evolving. Theories of reading have been largely derived from research on proficient adults or on children.

Ethnographic procedures provide a methodology which links theory to practice, and ultimately to the revision of practice (McMillan and Schumacher, 1984). Most studies present a descriptive narrative, i.e., "tell the story" of the participants, settings, and incidents. The focus is usually on groups and their activities as they evolve over time. Process analysis is emphasized. The descriptive accounts, in lay language, are a synthesis of the many perspectives obtained from the multiple kinds of data. This description represents the first level of interpretation, and, in some studies, is sufficient for the research purpose.

Other studies go beyond the descriptive narrative to add an analytical interpretive-theoretical dimension. Because case studies of classrooms or schools often have a holistic quality, they face the dilemma of the scope of theory. Various levels have been suggested (Glasser, and Strauss, 1967; Merton, 1957; Zetterberg, 1965), such as miniature theories, middle-range theories, and substantive theories in contrast to abstract theory, formal theory, or general theory. Miniature or middle-range theories seem most appropriate to ethnographic studies. Concepts or variables are derived from the data. Examples of concepts developed in ethnographic studies are "conceptual clarity" (Smith and

Schumacher, 1972) and "realistic opportunism" (Schumacher, 1976). The relationships between two or more concepts are the basis for hypotheses and theories. Ethnographic studies have developed miniature theories of pupil roles (Smith and Geoffrey, 1968), of individualized instruction (Smith and Keith, 1971), and of involuntary superintendent turnover (Iannaccone and Lutz, 1970), to name a few. Because the concepts or theories are derived from case studies, these provide direction for verification research, which can lead to further revision of the theory. The function of ethnographic studies in the scientific process is presented schematically in Figure 2.

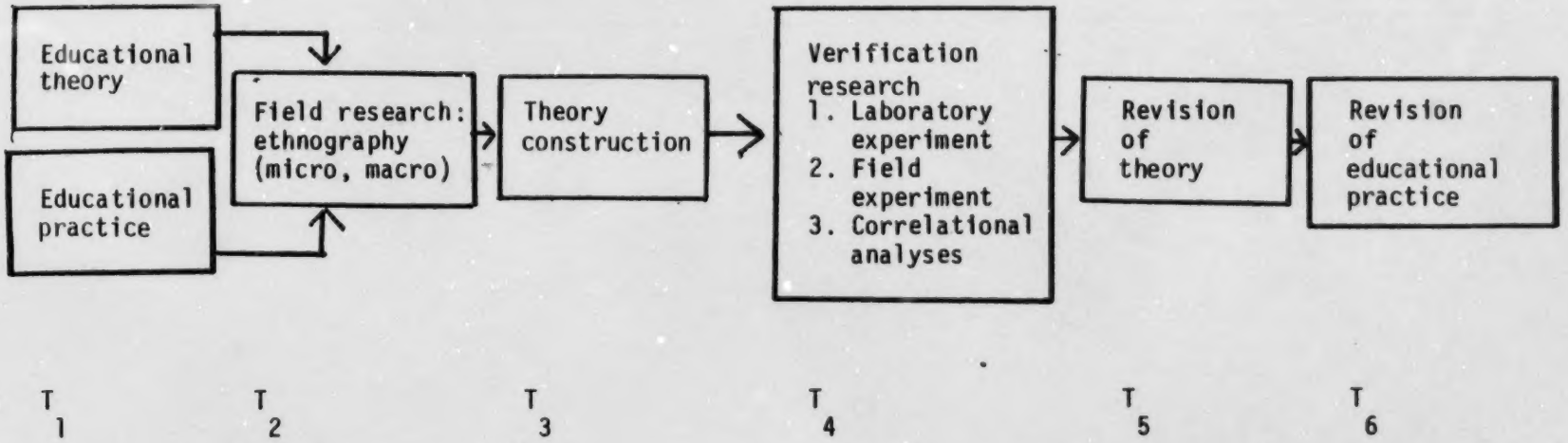
Thus, ethnographic study, as an exploratory mode of inquiry, may uncover new variables not yet identified in the literature, and may provide the most valid available means of operationalizing concepts for further verification studies. Further, because of its field orientation, subsequent changes in practice are more relevant, feasible, and reality-based.

PROCEDURES

Ethnographic procedures included: 1) selecting and training a research team, 2) gaining access and acceptance in the field, 3) holding weekly staff meetings and seminars to specify multiple research roles and evolving foci, and 4) using procedures to establish a valid data base.

Figure 2

Ethnographic Inquiry and Education Research *



* Adapted from L. M. Smith and W. Geoffrey, The complexities of an urban classroom: An analysis toward a general theory of teaching (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968), p. 249.

Selecting and Training a Research Team

The research team was selected to provide different experiential, training, and conceptual orientations. One senior investigator, a professor of reading, had tutored ABR's in centers and done previous research on adult reading. The other senior investigator was a professor of educational research with an interdisciplinary orientation and specialization in ethnography. One research assistant had a B.S. in sociology and had taught special education. The second research assistant had a B.A. in political science and was "new" to the field of education. Thus, one team member lacked teaching experience, and two team members had only general knowledge of the teaching of reading and the learning-to-read process.

The initial training of the research team stressed the mechanics of taking field notes and writing summary observations. During the first month, each senior investigator and research assistant observed the same class and then shared field notes at a staff meeting. Even the varied ways of taking field notes--lengthy paragraphs about a major event, or an abstract concept with observations woven into the narrative, or almost verbatim conversations and literal observations--seemed to reflect the different orientations of the team members. The summary observations and interpretive asides, especially those concerning what each researcher initially noticed and the questions to pursue upon returning to the site (Geer, 1964; Schatzman and Strauss, 1973), emphasized the complexity of the phenomena.

Procedures were established to organize and file the data. All field notes were dated with the date and place of observation and the occasion of observation (class instruction, tutoring session, interview, testing). The summary observations also contained the name of the observer. Summary observations were typed and duplicated. A folder containing both the summary observations and the field notes was filed by site and date.

Gaining Access and Acceptance in the Field

The cooperation of the centers was easily obtained. The directors of the centers recognized the immediate and long-range benefits of study of adults' learning-to-read processes. These experienced directors were already aware that working with adults differed from their previous experience in instruction or administration of programs for children aged six to sixteen years. The directors suggested the appropriate classes, introduced the co-directors of the project to the teachers, and presented the project to the various classes. A co-director was present at each orientation to answer any questions from the adult class members.

Establishing and maintaining the trust of the ABR's was a continuous task (Guba, 1980) and a team effort. The researchers dressed very casually to blend in with the participants. Procedures to minimize the differences between the educational levels of the students and the researchers were used -- e.g., unobtrusively writing in small notebooks. Student names and brief personal information were deliberately memorized to facilitate conversations. Seldom, initially, would an ABR talk to a

researcher unless the observer spoke his or her name first in a friendly manner. Researchers acknowledged that they could not read everything in print, praised achievement by students, and empathized with the teacher. To avoid the appearance of too many authority figures or learned strangers in an ABR class, only one researcher was usually scheduled to observe per period.

Different procedures were used to gain acceptance in different classes. One researcher assistant, initially seen as the word-list teacher and later seen as "the lady who takes notes and who likes to listen to you read," realized that the ABR's, regardless of the official explanation of the project, were unsure of her role. In time, she defined her role as a reading helper by initiating assistance during class study time. The second research assistant, who more easily blended in with the ABR's because of his appearance, never forced his presence on an individual but always responded in an interested and concerned manner. One senior investigator, who looked markedly different from the group and who observed less often than the other researchers, was viewed solely as an observer by ABR's. This limited the potential data base, and this investigator shifted to observing tutoring sessions. In several classes, the observer was often in the role of teacher's assistant, working with those individuals whom the teacher designated.

Each investigator had to acquire the ABRs' trust in a manner which was a sincere expression of herself or himself as a person in a role the ABR's were familiar with. Official approval and rational explanations of the project and the observers were not sufficient. The ABR's could

recognize and respond to the roles of tutor, teaching assistant, and tester, but not to that of simple observer. Unlike subjects of previous ethnographic research in elementary classrooms and other educational agencies (Schumacher, 1972, 1975), these adults continued to interact with the researchers rather than ignore or forget their presence. This may have been due to the fluid student population and the changing classroom atmospheres.

As the research team became more accustomed to the centers, staff, classes, and adults, acceptance in the field was established. When new students joined a class, the "regulars" legitimized the presence of the observer. When a substitute taught one class for a week, some ABR's asked one research assistant to be their teacher next year because they knew their regular teacher would be working elsewhere. Conversations were easily initiated by both the observer and the adults. However, the topics of conversation were usually those of the ABR's. Subtle efforts to steer conversations were often unsuccessful. It was important to note what was discussed as well as what tended to be ignored.

Weekly Staff Meetings and Seminars: Multiple Research Roles and Evolving Foci

Weekly staff meetings made it possible to collect data as a team rather than as four separate investigators. Staff meetings a) identified initial conceptualizations and merging foci reflected in the data, and b) continually adjusted the research roles to obtain a valid data base for the topic under study.

Multiple research roles were required because the instructional programs of each center differed in several respects from previously studied adult learning centers (Mezirow, Darkenwald, and Knox, 1975). By mapping (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973) each adult learning center, the team discovered that instruction was not limited to a one-hour class period but also occurred in various learning niches (Barker and Gump, 1964) at various times from 8:45 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. These learning niches were a) carrels where students practiced with tapes and workbooks, b) individual tutoring with volunteer paraprofessionals, c) individual tutoring with the ABR teacher, d) monthly student-teacher conferences to review progress and set goals, e) conferences to review standardized test results, f) field trips, and g) center-wide special programs for all students. Because of the multiple learning niches within each site, researchers were assigned to observe various niches to see the totality of the instructional process (Schumacher, 1979). Each learning niche required various degrees of participation, from complete participant to complete observer (Gold, 1958), and specific skills in the research role.

An inside/outside technique similar to Whyte and "Doc" (Whyte, 1955) and to Smith and Geoffrey (1968) was also used. An evening ABR class with the research assistant who had no previous teaching experience as the teacher and a senior investigator as the observer was established. Although the researcher-teacher could only sporadically summarize a class session in field notes, the senior investigator's notes were extremely rich data. No attempt was made to direct the reseacher's instruction. However, the effect of the teaching experience on the research assistant

was a high level of consciousness, observation, and concentration on the evolving research topic (Eisner, 1979) and subsequent seeking of suggestions. This yielded provocative insights and questions in areas of instruction, group dynamics, sequential learning, risk-taking skills of ABR's, cues to frustration levels, and the meaning of relevancy to these ABR's.

Another approach used to obtain oral indices of learning to read was the encouragement of teachers and tutors to try out various instructional techniques or materials and to analyze the results in terms of the evolving research questions. This practice contrasted with manipulation of a single variable to measure the effect on the dependent variable. Teacher and tutors were encouraged to have more group oral reading and discussion. This approach worked better with tutors than with teachers, who were concerned with immediate instructional problems. Oral reading was more natural in a tutoring situation. Insights were gleaned from the tapes of weekly tutoring sessions and from the discussions of the sessions by tutor and researcher.

Weekly staff meetings were held to coordinate and plan the multiple research roles. When attempting to gather both records through taping and more traditional ethnographic noninterfering observation without research control, the team had to use multiple research techniques. Flexibility and various skills within each role and across the roles were essential to obtain the different levels of abstraction in the data and to investigate the emerging foci.

Identifying the merging foci of the study was a continuous process throughout the nine months of observation. Periodic lengthy seminar staff meetings were held. Each researcher scanned his or her summary observation notes and presented to the staff initial conceptualizations and emerging research questions. Records of seminar discussions were kept.

For example, one focus was on each individual adult student. A reading profile synthesized all observations collected at that point in terms of reading behaviors and established a baseline. The reading profile contained the name of the adult; identification number; age; background information; and perceived behavior in instruction, word recognition, language, and comprehension. Each entry included the date of observation. The reading profiles were periodically updated throughout the year. At the end of the observation period, adult profiles were written on those students on whom enough data had been collected. The adult profile included physical appearance, attitude and personal relationships, work habits, family, teacher relationship, peer relationship, academic attitude, reading behavior, and purpose in attending the center. These profiles and the observation data became the basis for the Adult Snapshots presented in the chapter on adult development in the technical report.

Also, initial conceptualizations were explored in the seminar staff meetings. For example, an early conceptualization was that of E.T. Hall's "silent language." Silent language was the

> elaborate patterning of behavior which prescribes our handling of time, our special relationships, our attitudes toward, work, play and learning. In addition to what we say with our verbal language, we are constantly communicating our real feelings in our silent-language -- the language of behavior. (Hall, 1959, p. 15.)

After a month in the field, the team identified multiple language foci in the centers. The three language foci -- i.e., learning-to-read language, language of instruction, and socialization language--appeared together in the field notes throughout the nine months of observation. Although these languages appeared analytically discrete, in reality they were intertwined.

In seminar meetings, the researchers identified variables and research questions beyond those initially proposed in the foreshadowed problems. Variables that influenced the miscues of these ABR's were peer behavior, textual constraints, teacher, prior instruction, perception of how one learns, previous teacher, text skills, experience with print outside the center, attitude toward risk-taking, view of reading, and language. However, a tentative list of variables was merely the first step in the search for deeper meanings.

More questions arose about the interrelationships of variables that seem to influence reading behavior. For example, why do some adults consistently use syntactic cues in oral reading? Why do some adults retell a story, not according to what they accurately read aloud, but on the basis of their personal experience? Why do most ABR's exhibit only concrete thinking in contrast to abstract reasoning? Why do ABR's consistently not talk about ideas derived from reading, ask speculative

questions, or puzzle about abstract concepts? How does being overwhelmed with the problems of survival in a complex technological society affect the learning-to-read process for an adult?

Validity of the Data Base: Standards of Adequacy

Standards of adequacy for a valid base in an ethnographic study include on-site observation, use of "muted cues" and "unobtrusive measures," extensive field notes, and triangulation. The most elementary requirement of the methodology is participant-observation in the sense of "being-in" the setting. This distinguishes the methodology from research based on surveys, interview schedules, laboratory settings, or tests which tend to make the subjects conscious of the research. The ethnographer seeks to avoid interfering and thus contaminating the data. Guba (1978) suggests possible sources of distortions that the ethnographer is constantly on the alert to prevent. The research team believed distortions were minimized through the use of a team approach. From September through December, two researchers observed the morning classes, and one researcher observed weekly tutoring sessions. In addition, the inside/outside procedure was used in an evening class. The observation schedule changed in December with the addition of a second site to the study. One researcher observed two mornings a week at one site, a second researcher observed two mornings a week at a second site, and the inside/outside procedure continued through May. To cross-validate observations, the researchers switched morning observation sites in April and May. In essence, the research team observed the totality of two sites.

Close observation in a setting produces what Andrew Haplin (1966) has called "muted cues" and what Webb, et al. (1981) have called "unobtrusive measures." An observer listens and looks for offhand comments and explanations, raised eyebrows, hints that anyone is behaving atypically. Reactions of pupils to a teacher, of teachers to an administrator, or of staff members to one another, are constantly scanned in unstructured moments and settings such as coffee breaks, lunch, and changing of classes. Unobtrusive measures include such things as student drawings displayed in a hall, the lesson outline on the blackboard, the proverbs posted on bulletin boards, the planning charts on an administrator's desk, the attendance procedures in a center, the center's newspaper. These are the muted language--unobtrusive traces of unverbalized meanings that deepen the quality and validity of the data.

Extensive field notes indicate the length of time in the field and the scope and focus of the research problem. Field work is a labor-intensive mode of inquiry. The research team continually returned to the field during the nine months, noting the common-sense boundaries of the semesters. The field notes and summary observations ultimately became over 850 single-spaced typed pages that described processes over time. In addition to the observational typed records, testing data were collected on a number of ABE students.

Triangulation is a means of ensuring the validity of the data. The essence lies in obtaining, over a period time, different kinds of data from different persons in different organizational positions in different settings. As Denzin (1978) noted, triangulation is qualitative cross-

validation among multiple data sources, research methods, and theoretical schemes. Similarly House (1977, p. 31) writes:

> Validity is provided by cross-checking different data sources and by testing perceptions against those of participants. Issues and questions arise from the people and situations being studied rather than from the investigator's preconceptions. Concepts and indicators "derive from the subject's world of meaning and action." In constructing explanations, the naturalist looks for convergence of his data sources and develops sequential, phase-like explanations that assume no event has single causes.

In this study, triangulation was achieved through multiple methods, participants, situations, and organizations. Below is a summary of the sources of data used in corroboration of the findings.

Methods:	observations casual conversations focused interviews testing active engagement in the role of tutor, assistant, teacher documents: center's newspapers and announcements, project proposal, attendance cards, enrollment forms, state ABE newsletters
Participants:	ABR students ABR teachers center's directors adult education teachers adult education students state department adult education supervisors
Situations:	classrooms learning niches testing rooms center's administrative offices research team staff meetings 310 state adult education conference
Organizations:	public school system university State Department of Education

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, ethnography is an appropriate methodology when the purpose of the research is discovery or exploratory to describe and analyze a process from which variables can be identified and relationships suggested. These relationships can later be tested as hypotheses in verification research. The methodology is rigorous, time-consuming, intellectually demanding, and presents complexities in roles and research ethics. The methodology, although flexible in obtaining the data, has standards to assess the validity of the data. In addition, it is an exciting and fascinating approach to inquiry.

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